A CUP OF COLD WATER
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Psalm 13
Matthew 10:40–42

"Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones . . .
none of these will lose their reward."
Matthew 10:42 (NRSV)

To hope for a better future in this world—for the poor, the sick, the lonely and depressed,
for the slaves, the refugees, the hungry and homeless, for the abused, the paranoid,
the downtrodden and despairing, and, in fact, for the whole wide, wonderful,
and wounded world—is not something extra, something tacked on to the gospel
as an afterthought. And to work for that hope is not a distraction from the task
of mission and evangelism. It is a central, essential, vital, and life-giving part of it.

N.T. Wright
Surprised by Hope

You have told us to be still and know that you are God.
So come now into the stillness of this hour together.
Awaken us to the beauty of your creation and the gift of this new day.
Awaken us to your lively presence in every act of creativity and reconciliation
and kindness. And startle us again with your truth.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

In a recent *New Yorker*, there was an article by Ian Frazier, "Hungry Minds: Tales from a Chelsea Soup Kitchen." Frazier is a fine writer and bestselling novelist. For several years now he has been conducting a weekly writing workshop at a church soup kitchen in New York City. The Church of the Holy Apostles, an Episcopalian congregation in lower Manhattan, sponsors New York's largest soup kitchen. How it happened is an amazing story. The

church is a New York landmark, a beautiful sanctuary with a high arched cathedral ceiling and gorgeous stained glass windows. Over the years the congregation slowly dwindled in size, until the 200 or so members simply couldn't afford to pay the bills and keep it open. A new, young rector suggested to the congregation that "if Holy Apostles is going out of business, it might as well do some good before it does."

So in October of 1982, they launched a free-lunch program in their Mission House. Thirty-five homeless people came. The program grew. Other people became interested and started to give money. By the mid-eighties they were serving 900 lunches daily and bursting the seams of the Mission House.

And then, in 1990, during roof repairs to the main sanctuary, a fire broke out. Damage to the roof and windows was extensive. There was adequate insurance, and during the restoration, while the pews were out, they came up with an idea: why not leave the pews out and use the large worship space, which was essentially empty and unused Monday through Friday, for the lunch program? And that is what they did. They auctioned off the pews, and every day set up round tables to feed the hungry. Now, in their sanctuary, they are serving 1,200 meals a day, and other support and referral services are there as well, like Ian Frazier's writing workshop, which has attracted some amazingly gifted and creative men and women who, for a myriad of reasons, are homeless and hungry. The budget is now $2.7 million, $10,000 a day. It comes from the 200 members, local businesses, foundations, and the City of New York.

I love the logistics. Volunteers put up the tables and chairs for 1,200, do most of the cleaning and serving. The rules are simple. No overt proselytizing, and no one is turned away. You get a ticket in the Mission House, enter the sanctuary to eat, and if you're still hungry, go outside, stand in line, get another ticket, and eat again.

Ian Frazier pressed Associate Rector Elizabeth Maxwell about the specific religious inspiration and motivation for the program. She said,

> Well, we do this because Jesus said to feed the hungry. There's no more to it than that. Jesus told us to take care of the poor and hungry and those in prison. He said, "As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me." In all the intricacies of scriptural interpretation, that message—feed the hungry—could not be more clear. Those of us at Holy Apostles feel we have a Sunday-Monday connection. The bread and wine of the Eucharist we share on Sunday becomes the food we share with our neighbors during the week. . . . We believe that our job as Christians is to meet Jesus in the world. We meet him, unnamed and unrecognized, in the guests who come to the soup kitchen every day.

“Whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water . . . shall not lose his reward,” Jesus said.

At the heart of the gospel is a simple moral mandate: kindness, unconditional kindness. A cup of cold water for the thirsty. Food for the hungry. Clothes for the naked. A recent book, *A Christian Theology of Hospitality* by Arthur Sutherland, defines hospitality as the practice of welcoming strangers, the needy, the distressed, even your enemies, no questions asked. Sutherland says it’s simple: “Hospitality is the practice by which the church stands or falls.” God calls us to hospitality, he says, because “God’s goal for all creation is a kind of homecoming: a welcoming and a receiving” (*Interpretation*, April 2008).

Sometimes we forget how elegantly simple New Testament Christianity is. I returned on Friday from the biennial meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in San Jose, California. It is partly a family reunion, partly a complex legislature with standing committees, resolutions, overtures, motions, amendments, substitute amendments, amendments to the substitute motion—Presbyterians actually love this sort of thing—late into the night, tackling financial reports from the church’s mission agencies, Pension Fund, Foundation. It’s partly a battlefield where Presbyterians from all over the country, and from the entire political and theological spectrum, come to argue about sex. This year the Assembly restored the right of gay and lesbian Presbyterians to dissent from the Constitutional provision that prevents their ordination. And while they were at it, the Assembly struck down that Constitutional provision itself. That matter will now be discussed, debated, and voted on by our church’s 175 presbyteries. Presbyterians argue and pass resolutions about Israel-Palestine, abortion, and the religious implications of global warming. But the best parts of the General Assembly are the reports of Presbyterian Mission and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, which is on the ground every time there is a natural disaster in our country and around the world, providing food, water, clothing, and shelter. The best parts are about the literally thousands of Presbyterians who have traveled to New Orleans to stay at the St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church while building and rehabbing homes destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. The best parts are about the school in Pakistan; the hospitals in India, Thailand, and Kenya, founded and staffed by Presbyterian doctors and nurses; the colleges and universities in Egypt and Lebanon and Ghana. It’s a big enterprise, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is, with 2.2 million members in 11,000 congregations in this country and mission relationships all over the world and a mission budget well in excess of $100 million, and it is good to be reminded that it is finally about serving the world in the name of the one who told his disciples that a cup of cold water given to the thirsty is a Christ-like act of grace.

There is, and always has been, a lively and important debate in the Christian church about whether Christ's mandate to care for the poor, feed the hungry, and give water to the thirsty means providing hands-on, tangible services, or does it mean advocating for social and political change to address the root causes of hunger and poverty?

We are currently in a major global food crisis. It is complex and profound. Every major national news magazine has had a cover article on it recently. A United Nations World Food Summit gathered heads of state recently to talk about widespread global hunger. Food prices have essentially doubled globally in two years, sparking riots all over the world. The reasons include India and China, with growing populations; a greater demand for food and fewer farmers; the spike in oil prices, which impacts the cost of fertilizer as well as transportation costs; the conversion of American corn from food to ethanol. It's very complex and goes far beyond the ability of any one church, foundation, or nation, for that matter, to remedy. And it will require a renewed commitment on the part of our nation—which both produces and consumes more than any other—and our government. And so if you want to take seriously Jesus' moral imperative that water be provided to the thirsty and food to the hungry, you have to think about politics—locally, nationally, globally.

Princeton's Elaine Pagels says, "Jesus' words are the basis for a radical new social situation based on the value and dignity of every human being" (*Beyond Belief*, pp. 9-10).

Social activists sometimes argue that direct service programs—soup kitchens, lunch programs—don't change anything and actually distract us from addressing systemic injustice. I think the opposite is true. The more acts of kindness and generosity extended by more people, the greater will be the sensitivity to the political and social causes of hunger and poverty. The point is well taken that if the Good Samaritan, who stopped by the roadside to assist a traveler who had been robbed and beaten and took him to an inn and paid his bill while he recuperated—if the same thing happened the next day and the next, the Good Samaritan would be remiss and irresponsible if he didn't stop by city hall and inquire about the budget for better police protection along the road. It is, I believe, both-and. Both building houses and advocating for accessible low-cost housing; both lunch programs and advocating for job training for the unemployed.

It is both-and: advocacy in the public arena on behalf of the poor and also the provision of needed food and clothing and shelter—the cup of cold water.

Christianity is about an alternative social vision—an alternative to the violence and suffering and poverty that characterize daily life; it's a vision

of kindness, compassion, gentleness, and peace. And our job as a church of Jesus Christ, as a mainline Protestant denomination in the United States, as a congregation on this corner of a busy American city, is to keep that vision alive and clear and present in the world.

The ancient world was stunned when it first saw it. Followers of Jesus, Christians, doing what he had commanded them: feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, extending compassion to the dying, doing the unthinkable, touching the untouchable, picking up unwanted and abandoned children from the streets of Rome and caring for them. A famous Christian theologian in the second century, Tertullian, wrote, "What marks us in the eyes of our enemies is the practice of loving kindness. 'Only look,' they say, 'how they love one another.'" Just 100 years after Jesus, Christians were already breaking out of the old structures of tribe, clan, and race to extend the love of Jesus Christ to all. To the citizens of Rome who despised and persecuted them, Tertullian wrote, "We are your brothers and sisters too" (Pagels, pp. 9–10). No one had ever said anything like that before: "We are one. We are, all of us, children of one God."

We do it here at Fourth Presbyterian Church through the mission outreach program of Chicago Lights. In a hundred small ways every day a cup of cold water is extended. We provide lunches and Sunday Night Supper for 125 people here, and Monday Night Supper at Catholic Charities and with several ecumenical partners Friday Night Supper. We provide clothing and referral services through a Social Service Center that extends Christ's welcome to all. We provide tutoring during the school year to 400 urban children and a Summer Day program for 125, a healthy and safe and helpful alternative to life on the streets. We provide a place of nurture and lively stimulation for the aging; health services and counseling; a Day School and a day care center.

A hundred times every day, because you are part of the church, you extend a cup of cold water to someone who is desperately thirsty.

Sometimes the gesture is so small you can barely see it. One of the big public events at the meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a worship service on Sunday morning. We rent the biggest hall in town—in San Jose this year, two halls, each seating 4,000. There is great music and singing, great praying and preaching. We remember the ministers who died; we recognize and applaud and pray for our Presbyterian military chaplains— about twenty were there, new chaplains, home from a tour of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. We celebrate the retirement of missionaries, who have served in Indonesia, Japan, Thailand for forty years, and we commission new mission workers: full-time ministers, doctors, teachers, public health professionals, and literally hundreds of young adult volunteers serving short term, all over the world.

It’s quite an event, and I wouldn’t miss it. We also receive communion, all 8,000 to 10,000 of us. It’s long—two hours at least. I took my seat, and beside me sat a woman and her daughter, in a wheelchair. I introduced myself during the prelude. They were members of a Presbyterian church in San Jose, originally from the Philippines. Shirley introduced me to Kelly, her daughter, who, she explained, has cerebral palsy. She said she wanted Kelly to know more about the Presbyterian church, and someone told her to come to this event. So she did: loaded Kelly and her wheelchair into the car and drove downtown and parked and put Kelly in her chair and wheeled several blocks to the Civic Center. Kelly sat through the two-hour service, not entirely comfortably, I could tell: unable to hold her own bulletin, insisting on standing for the hymns, which she did with great difficulty and her mother’s help. When we finally came to the communion, Kelly, exhausted, had now leaned her head to rest on her mother’s shoulder and I wondered how in the world they would manage the pieces of bread to be dipped in the cup as it passed down the row, not an easy maneuver for anyone. When it came to us, I held the bread basket and Shirley knew exactly what to do. She took two pieces. When the cup came, I held it while she dipped a piece of bread in the cup and carefully placed it in her daughter’s hand and guided it gently to her mouth and then communed herself.

It was a gesture of incarnate love, a gesture of such exquisite kindness and gentleness and compassion. And I thought about how it is repeated millions of times every day, in the name of Christ, all over the world—in our churches, our soup kitchens and social service agencies, within our families and our circle of friends.

“The cup of water given for thee still holds the freshness of thy grace,” the old hymn puts it. Such simple and exquisite gentleness and kindness.

Amen.